
Access, Opportunity and Connections: Leveraging the Powerful Brand of Public Libraries to support migrant, global populations - The Toronto Public Library's Support for Syrian Refugees

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Abstract:

The 21st century will be defined by global migration as people flee wars and political persecution, are displaced by climate change, or immigrate to seek new economic opportunities and a better quality of life. Mass migration will enable countries to address the seismic demographic shift of the aging population and build their future workforce.

Global migration, however, presents opportunities and challenges for both the people migrating, and for the countries they leave, migrate through, and arrive in. The world's population is increasingly concentrated in large urban centers or megacities, which are the immigrant reception areas. The ability of megacities, the engines of the global economy, to connect and successfully integrate diverse newcomer populations, is a critical driver of creativity, economic competitiveness, and overall social well-being.

With a recognized brand and global reach, public libraries provide critical supports to migrant populations, and to the cities who integrate them. Libraries provide barrier-free access to opportunities that support everyone, including newcomers, in reaching their potential. Worldwide, public libraries enhance and foster cross-cultural understanding, build welcoming communities, and create vibrant urban environments where population

diversity is leveraged as a strength, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute and experience an enhanced quality of life. In times of crisis, people defend public libraries as powerful symbols of the shared values of intellectual freedom and democracy. This brand empowers public libraries to be strong advocates for newcomers, offering access, opportunities, and connections that enable newcomers, both immigrants and refugees, to create a home, whether their location is by choice or circumstance.

Using the Toronto Public Library's example of successfully supporting Syrian refugees and serving the diverse city of Toronto, the critical role of public libraries integrating newcomers is demonstrated.

Preamble

In December 2015, Toronto Public Library (TPL) published a blog post welcoming Syrian refugees to Canada, which sparked the following response:

That's very kind of you.
we are looking to seeing you very soon ,so our flight is on Thursday.today we were thinking about the library in Toronto when we returned the books we borrowed from a library in Beirut.Now we will have the best opportunity to have an access that will help us integrate to our new family new home.
Thanks to you all for accepting us in the big Canadian family.
Vanig Garabedian

The global brand of public libraries unites global residents and builds global communities.

Introduction:

The Syrian Refugee Crisis has reverberated throughout Europe and around the world and is the most significant displacement of people since World War II. The United Nations' Syrian Refugee Response Portal identifies 4.8 million people of concern related to the [Syrian Refugee crisis](#)¹ as of April 2016. The Canadian government's immigration portal identifies that worldwide there are 19.5 million refugees with other estimates ranging as high as 60 million including people impacted by wars, political persecution and climate change. *A refugee is different from an immigrant, in that an immigrant is a person who chooses to settle permanently in another country. Refugees are forced to flee.*² Migration by refugees can create hardships for both the people forced to flee, and for the communities and countries which they journey through, and where they arrive and settle.

Beyond this current refugee crisis, the 21st century will be a time of unprecedented between countries and migration by people. Parag Khanna, a global strategist and author of *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*³, argues that the current map of sovereign states is essentially obsolete. It is not about the boundaries that separate us, but the lines of connection. He argues that instead of focusing on nation-states, we should focus on the dozens of megacities that house most of the world's people and where economic growth

¹ "Syrian Regional Refugee Response." United Nations Humans Rights Commission. 5 May 2016. 7 May 2016 <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>>.

² "The Refugee System in Canada." Government of Canada. 25 November 2015. 2 May 2016 <<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/canada.asp>>

³ Khanna, Parag. [Mapping the Future of Global Civilization](#). Random House Publishing Group. 2016

occurs. *The most networked and connected people and countries will win.* We are then increasingly living in what Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan coined the “global village” - a world of global connection and migration, where global issues are local issues.⁴

To address the global crisis of Syrian refugees and the reality of an increasingly mobile, global population, Khalid Koser, Executive Director of Interim Secretariat of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), highlights three critical key strategies that support a global population on the [World Economic Forum Website](#)⁵. Koser argues for:

- *looking upstream, to address the conditions that are driving people from their homes, and the need to provide better protection and assistance in the countries where they initially arrive;*
- *looking downstream, integrating those who have already arrived, with a focus on education; and*
- *looking to the future, recognizing that supporting migration provides the opportunity to fill labour market gaps, address demographic deficits like the aging population, and respond to issues such as global warming.*

The successful integration of newcomer populations, including both refugees and immigrants, is a global issue and one that will be critical to our future economic and social well-being. Conversely, the failure to integrate new populations will result in global failure. With their recognized global brand, public libraries are strong partners in a network of global services that support the integration of migrant populations, where they live and where they migrate.

The Public Library’s Global Brand and Role

A global village needs strong public institutions with a global reach and commonly held values. Public libraries are a powerful, democratizing institution with a recognizable global brand. The preamble to the [IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994](#) states: *Public libraries are a world-wide phenomenon. They occur in a variety of societies, in differing cultures and at different stages of development. A well-used public library will make a significant contribution to the vitality of an urban area and be an important learning and social centre and meeting place, particularly in scattered rural areas*⁶.

In times of political turmoil, the public library is recognized, not only as a service institution, but as a powerful symbol of democracy embodying the right to information, ideas, and opinions. By building connections between newcomers and established residents and offering a range of responsive services, public libraries are uniquely positioned to serve newcomer populations, provide settlement services that help them integrate and to create welcoming communities.

⁴ McLuhan, Marshall and Bruce R. Powers. *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press. 1993.

⁵ Koser, Khalid. “Europe’s Refugee Crisis Explained.” World Economic Forum. 12 November 2015. 2 May 2016. <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/europes-refugee-crisis-explained/>>.

⁶ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. “IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994.” 15 April 2016. 30 April 2016. <<http://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994>>.

The *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994* sets out an inspiring description of the role and shared values of public libraries around the globe, and defines the public libraries values and brand, which are echoed in the Toronto Public Library's latest strategic plan.

A BBC editorial identified that in 2015, the [EU](#)⁷ countries would be divided on the best strategies to settle and cope with more than a million migrants and refugees arriving in Europe. The European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA) has issued this [important statement](#)⁸ *[we] understand the concerns of some countries in dealing with the refugee crisis and acknowledge that careful consideration requiring governmental measures at European and local level are necessary to facilitate the mass migration.* At the same time, EBLIDA believes that libraries all over Europe should act as *a platform for democratic and open-minded values, and be a safe place where social inclusiveness for all is a priority.*

The Canadian Context

The goal of Canada's refugee program is to provide stability to those fleeing persecution and hardship who *have no hope of relief*. Canada's resettlement programs has received international recognition, providing permanent residence as a long term solution

Immigrants are admitted through main classes: economic class, family class, and refugees.⁹ Annually, Canada welcomes about one out of ten refugees through government-assisted and privately sponsored refugee programs. By February 2016, the Canadian government welcomed 25,000 Syrian refugees, of which approximately 6,000 have settled in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. By the end of 2016, Canada is on track to [welcome more than 300,000 immigrants](#)¹⁰ and will increase the number of spaces for refugees and family reunification arrivals.

Diversity Our Strength: Toronto, the Global Village

While the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis is on a smaller scale in Canada than in Europe, Toronto, the global village, is breaking new ground in the most fundamental challenge that the world's megacities face: how do we welcome newcomers and how do we all get along?

Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world and one of four main immigrant reception areas in Canada. Most importantly, this diversity is welcomed and celebrated. Immigrants make up 49% of Toronto's population and 38% of the urban region's population, which is significantly higher than the national figure for Canada of 21%. Similarly, 49% of Toronto's population and 38% of the regional population self-identify as visible minorities,

⁷ "Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts." BBC. 4 March 2016. 30 April 2016. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>>.

⁸ European Bureau of Library Information and Documentation Associations. "Press Release: Public Libraries in Europe Welcome Refugees." 21 September 2015. 2 May 2016. <<http://www.eblida.org/news/press-release-public-libraries-in-europe-welcome-refugees.html>>

⁹ "Key Highlights – 2016 Immigration Levels Plan." Government of Canada. 8 March 2016. 19 May 2016. <<http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=1038709>>

¹⁰ Zilio, Michelle. "Canada on Track to Welcome More than 300,000 Immigrants in 2016." *Globe and Mail*. 8 March 2016. 9 May 2016. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-seeks-to-bring-more-than-300000-newcomers-this-year/article29069851/>>

compared to 19% of the Canadian population.¹¹ Toronto is also home to indigenous populations of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit heritage. Toronto residents comprise of over 230 ethnic origins and 45% of the population identifies their mother tongue as distinct from Canada's two official languages (English and French).¹² Simply put, Toronto's motto defines the city's unique value proposition: [Diversity Our Strength](#)¹³.

Economist Richard Florida links population diversity to economic growth and competitiveness. Florida argues that countries with high levels of diversity adapt new technology and ideas¹⁴ and attract knowledge workers. Building on the work of two economists, Quamrul Ashraf of Williams College and Oded Galor of Brown University, Florida concludes that diversity stimulates economic growth; conversely, a homogenous population slows it down. The city of Toronto supports diversity as both a shared value and as an economic driver.

One striking example of the value of diversity comes from a recent Statistics Canada (2016) study, which found that children who arrive as refugees outperform their Canadian-born peers in educational attainment.¹⁵ Children who arrive as one of three categories of refugees (private, government, or landed) have migrated with their families to escape hardship but experience better quality of life and through education, are positioned to contribute to the Canadian workforce and economy.

The City of Toronto supports the goals of Canada's refugee program and launched [Access T.O.](#)¹⁶ to provide barrier-free access to city services for vulnerable populations. In December 2014, Mayor John Tory signed the [Integrating Cities Charter](#)¹⁷ reaffirming Toronto's commitment to provide equal opportunities for all residents, to integrate newcomers, and to embrace diversity. Toronto is the first city outside of Europe to sign this

¹¹ 2011 National Household Survey: Immigration, Citizenship, Place of Birth, Ethnicity, Visible Minorities, Religion and Aboriginal Peoples." City of Toronto. 9 May 2013. 2 May 2016. <http://www1.toronto.ca/city_of_toronto/social_development_finance_administration/files/pdf/nhs_background.pdf>

¹² "2011 National Household Survey: Immigration, Citizenship, Place of Birth, Ethnicity, Visible Minorities, Religion and Aboriginal Peoples." City of Toronto. 9 May 2013. 2 May 2016. <http://www1.toronto.ca/city_of_toronto/social_development_finance_administration/files/pdf/nhs_background.pdf>

¹³ "Coat of Arms and City Motto." City of Toronto. 10 May 2016. <<http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=6fd87aac783a1410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD&vgnnextchannel=83574d3dab5f1410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>>

¹⁴ Florida, Richard. "How Diversity Leads to Economic Growth." *CityLab*. 12 December 2011. 12 May 2016. <<http://www.citylab.com/work/2011/12/diversity-leads-to-economic-growth/687/>>

¹⁵ Hou, Feng and Aneta Bonikowska. *Educational and Labour Market Outcomes of Childhood Immigrants by Admission Class*. Statistics Canada. 25 April 2016. Web. 19 May 2016. <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2016377-eng.htm>>

¹⁶ "Access T.O. for Undocumented Torontonians." City of Toronto. September 2015. 10 May 2016. <<http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=9dfc33501bac7410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>>

¹⁷ "Integrating Cities Charter." City of Toronto. 18 December 2014. 10 May 2016. <<http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=9dfc33501bac7410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>>

charter. Mayor John Tory declared that Toronto Newcomer Day would be celebrated annually and the [first Toronto Newcomer Day](#)¹⁸ took place in May 2015.

Toronto Public Library: A Strong Foundation in Welcoming Newcomers

Libraries and other public institutions from around the world – including China, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland – have visited Toronto Public Library and Toronto to understand how inclusive, responsive services are delivered in a diverse multicultural urban setting.

TPL offers a broad range of services to newcomers directly and through partnerships. TPL’s [multicultural service goals](#)¹⁹ support access to collections, programs, and services echoing the values of the Public Library Manifesto. Quality services are delivered online and through TPL’s 100 branches, which offer safe and welcoming public space throughout Toronto’s diverse neighbourhoods and through outreach, in community locations.

Embedded services such as the federally-funded [Library Settlement Partnerships](#) (LSP) supports settlement workers in library branches serving a high concentration of newcomers. LSP has been studied internationally as a best practice, and replicated in other Canadian and U.S. libraries. TPL partners with eight local settlement agencies to deliver settlement services in fourteen library branches in the languages spoken by newcomer populations. Evening and weekend hours extend access. LSP workers offer a variety of customized programs that meet newcomers’ immediate and long-term needs. A third-party evaluation based on the shared outcomes of the Canadian government, settlement agencies and TPL was conducted between 2013 and 2014. It concluded that 83% of the surveyed clients were always able to access LSP when they needed it and newcomers value the service highly.²⁰ Newcomers stated that the library was the first place they felt at home in Toronto. LSP workers supported TPL’s efforts to assist Syrian refugees and recent statistics show growing use of LSP.

The value of TPL’s services to all residents, including newcomers, is demonstrated in *So Much More: the Economic Impact of The Toronto Public Library on the City of Toronto*.²¹ The report concluded that for every dollar invested in TPL, Torontonians receive \$5.63 worth of market value of services delivered. Of the 72% Torontonians using library services, the total direct benefit is as much as \$500 per library member. The newly arrived Syrian families will benefit from TPL’s services as part of their resettlement journey.

¹⁸ “Toronto Newcomer Day 2015.” City of Toronto. 10 May 2016. <<http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=f9eb4289cc0bd410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD&vgnextchannel=adb8f40f9aae0410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>>

¹⁹ “Multicultural Service Goals.” Toronto Public Library. 9 May 2016. <<http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/about-the-library/mission-vision-values/multicultural-service-goals.jsp>>

²⁰ Public Interest Strategy & Communications. *Toronto Library Settlement Partnerships (LSP) Program: Final Evaluation Report 2013-2014*. Public Interest Strategy & Communications. July 2014.

²¹ Stolarick, Kevin and Kimberly Silk. *So Much More: The Economic Impact of the Toronto Public Library on the City of Toronto*. Martin Prosperity Institute. December 2013. 10 May 2016. <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/europes-refugee-crisis-explained/>>

Support for Syrian Refugees

TPL's response to Syrian refugees leveraged existing library resources, services and partnerships. TPL's strategies to serve Syrian refugees are highlighted under TPL's Strategic Plan target outcomes: Expanding access, increasing opportunity and building connections.

Access

We will break down barriers to access so that Torontonians from all walks of life have easy, local access to the library services they want and need

A founding principle of TPL service to Syrian refugees is to provide barrier-free outreach and access to both privately sponsored and government-assisted refugees (GARs), beginning with pre-arrival and leveraging social media channels.

Social media was utilized to engage and connect with refugees and sponsors. Prior to the first Syrians' arrival in Canada, TPL published a [blog post](#) summarizing its newcomer services, which are readily available to Syrian refugees. Many Torontonians shared the information virtually and responded warmly. One refugee, who was preparing to leave for Toronto, left a comment, expressing how much he was looking forward to using TPL and its resources.

Key communication pieces were translated in Arabic and Western Armenian such as TPL's *Welcome to Toronto* document. It summarizes newcomer services and has been widely distributed through information fairs for private sponsors and at outreach visits to refugees. Private sponsors are appreciative of this document as it assists with their sponsored family's community orientation.

Orientation sessions were provided for private sponsors in library branches. In keeping with the City of Toronto's [Refugee Resettlement Program](#)²², TPL provided additional pre-arrival support for private sponsors. Nine information sessions were held in partnership with the Arab Community Centre of Toronto and an existing LSP agency partner, Catholic CrossCultural Services, with the goal of supporting relationships, fostering cross-cultural understanding and connecting to community resources. Over 230 private sponsors participated in these sessions and found them relevant in supporting their refugee families.

Outreach to refugees' temporary housing also connected them to TPL. Syrian refugees began arriving daily in December 2015 and were placed temporarily in Toronto hotels. COSTI Immigrant Service, the lead agency responsible for resettlement, faced challenges in finding affordable housing for the large families and some families were forced to stay in the hotels for longer than anticipated. Toronto Newcomer Office mobilized City Services, including TPL, to provide coordinated services in five hotels.

Engaging programming was offered in hotels to build relationships and connections with refugee families. Between the months of February to mid-April, creative TPL branch staff delivered fifteen fun children's programs to 494 participants at all five hotels. At the Toronto Plaza Hotel, housing the highest number of refugees, TPL connected with a local Arabic performer to provide storytelling. Refugee families learned the names of TPL staff and they began communicating with them, expressing their appreciation for the programs.

²² "Refugee Resettlement Program." City of Toronto. 10 May 2016. <<http://www.toronto.ca/refugees>>

Easy, barrier-free path to membership without a permanent address or the requirement of immigration status

For families forced to flee with few possessions, having a library card is an important status symbol, viewed by sponsors and refugee families as a significant step in resettling in Canada. So it was important to get library cards into the hands of refugee families as soon as possible. Refugees became library members without a permanent address. TPL provided the local library as the first address, enabling barrier-free access and reinforcing the idea that refugees are welcome and belong in the Library, a community cornerstone.

Opportunities

We will provide opportunities for continuous and self-directed learning

In keeping with its role of providing access to information and learning, TPL leveraged resources and partnerships to provide support for sponsors and refugees. TPL staff participated in six information fairs for private sponsors with the Toronto Newcomer Office and Local Immigration Partnership, networks of agencies serving newcomers. Private sponsors responded positively at the events and were encouraged to share their experiences openly and candidly in supporting refugees.

TPL built on this connection with the sponsors and community agencies to support monthly, private sponsor meet-ups and general refugee meet-ups in branches. Meet-ups offer a safe and welcoming space for sponsors and refugees to connect with each other and with community supports and networks, and help address the issue of social isolation.

In anticipation of increased demand for collections and materials in Arabic and Armenian, additional funding was allocated and local sectors were sourced. The adult Arabic collection budget was tripled while the children's collection was doubled. Spending on the established Armenian collection was increased by 50% for both adult and children's materials. TPL actively collects materials in over 40 languages reflective of Toronto's newcomer communities.

The public schools of Ontario and Toronto actively support and promote dual language literacy as a strength,²³ recognizing the value of diversity. English language learning is supported as an addition to children's first language, rather than a replacement for it. TPL supports dual language literacy and intergenerational connections through its multilingual collections. TPL offers a wide range of English language learning classes through partnerships with the public school board and community agencies. Research shows that a child and family's language proficiency in English and French is linked to education and economic outcomes.²⁴

²³ *Supporting English Language Learners. A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators Grades 1-8.* Ontario Ministry of Education resources. 2008. 15 May 2016. <
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/esleldprograms/guide.pdf>>

²⁴

Through partnerships with local publishers and book industry, new children's books were donated and distributed as first possessions for refugees in their new home. To make the library outreach visits memorable, children received the books in a celebration of their arrival.

Connections

We will provide access to a range of local and city wide cultural experiences that engage residents and make them feel connected to the local community

TPL created events such as “Welcome to Toronto Public Library” in early April 2016. Over 40 Syrian newcomers and their sponsors gathered for an evening of music and information in English and Arabic. Co-presented with the Aga Khan Museum, the event featured musicians who performed traditional Arabic songs, delighting families who clapped and sang along. The familiar music welcomed the newcomers and acknowledged that their heritage was valued and would continue in Canada. TPL also delivered a presentation on newcomer services and an Arabic story time. During the formal presentation, a popular Kid's Corner offered fun activities and connected TPL staff with young newcomer children. TPL book bags containing a children's book and library information were handed out. Library cards were made and partner agencies connected refugees to other city services.

The event also launched an extension to TPL's popular museum pass lending program, the Sun Life Museum + Arts Pass (MAP) program, to help Syrian refugees discover and experience Toronto's many arts and culture venues and attractions. The Sun Life Financial Museum + Arts Pass allows Torontonians to check out a free family pass, for free with an adult library card, to participating cultural venues including the Toronto Zoo, the Ontario Science Centre, Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Aga Khan Museum. Through the Newcomers Welcome Pass extension, partners provided additional passes for Syrian refugee families, as well as a specially-designed MAP booklet which describes the venues in English and Arabic – all to make it easier for these newcomers to the city to access the program. Through the program, Syrians can explore their new city and visit cultural attractions with the goal of fostering a sense of belonging, connection and community.

The Welcome event was a success and TPL received a congratulatory tweet from Toronto Newcomer Office. [Torontoist](#) information website also covered the event, which further promoted TPL resources to all Torontonians.

TPL's connection with the Syrian refugees began before their arrival in Canada and continues throughout the settlement process. By providing barrier free and responsive service, TPL strives to meet the needs of newcomers throughout their settlement process, which can span many years and even generations

Leveraging the Powerful Global Brand of Libraries to Support Settlement and Inclusion

In the global village in which we now live, the brand of public libraries is increasingly relevant. By offering access to everyone regardless of status, by creating opportunities for education and learning, and by connecting everyone to their unique and shared culture, public

libraries bring residents from diverse backgrounds together. And through shared experiences and international associations such as IFLA, public libraries create new opportunities to collectively leverage our powerful brand, to advocate for and uphold our shared values through challenging circumstances, and to contribute to our global success.

There can be no stronger statement of the value of public libraries in the global village than the words of Vanig Gargedian, a global library user and newly arrived resident to Toronto: “the public library is the *best opportunity* for our future success”.

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